

Obama's Interfaith Fluency

Maureen Fiedler | Jun. 5, 2009 NCR Today

I'm delighted to be part of NCR's on-line conversational community.

This week, I'm struck (as I often am) by President Obama's religious and linguistic skills, this time in Cairo as he addressed the Muslim world.

When he spoke at Notre Dame, I said to a friend, "he speaks Catholic." After the Cairo address, it's clear that he's fluent in "Muslim." In fact, in the theo-political world, he's truly multi-lingual, interfaith. Today, I expect he will be fluent in Judaism as he walks through the tragic memories of Buchenwald.

More than that, he can deliver subtle messages without naming the intended recipient. At Notre Dame, he offered a wonderful personal memory of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, but "if anyone was listening" he was also sending a powerful message to the present-day hierarchy that Bernardin's moderate stance is a good model for bishops.

So also in his messages to the Muslim world. He never mentioned President Ahmadinejad of Iran by name, but his words decrying holocaust denial were a thinly-disguised message to Tehran. (They were also a message to Iranian voters, who will select a new president within days).

But most important, President Obama conveyed deep respect for the Islamic faith with his use of the Muslim greeting: Salaam aleikum ("Peace be with you?"), when he mentioned the names of Mohammed, Moses and Jesus "followed immediately by the words, "may peace be upon them," and with his multiple quotations from the Qu'ran. These are phrases I've heard from my Muslim guests on Interfaith Voices many times.

It's a welcome change in knowledge, tone and respect.

I also loved the fact that Obama spoke strongly for women's rights in the Islamic world. Well-placed sources tell me that he is visiting the Vatican some time this summer. Do you suppose he can deliver a similar message there?

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